

Exploring Identity

Bible Witness Script – Cornelius’ Servant Based on Peter’s visit to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10)

My name is ... [*LUCIA, if the reader is female; LUCIUS, if the reader is male*]

I have spent my whole life in the service of a Roman army officer named Cornelius, who rose to the rank of Centurion in the Italian Cohort. At the time of which I tell, he was stationed in Caesarea on the eastern shore of the Great Sea. You can read the whole of the story I’m going to tell you in chapter ten of the book they call the Acts of the Apostles.

I was there when it happened. I was there when the Spirit of God came down on Cornelius and all of us in his household. It was the greatest day of my life ... But I’m getting ahead of myself. This story starts about four days before that, when my master, Cornelius, had a clear and specific vision from God. The vision said that he should send to Joppa for a Jewish man called Simon Peter to come and speak with us all. My brother, Sextus, was in the group sent to Joppa. They found the man, just as was promised in the vision. They told him of their mission and invited him to travel back to Cornelius’ house with them. Sextus says that you could tell that Simon Peter was uncomfortable about this.

Now, remember that, from birth, Jews learn to keep themselves separate from all other nations, especially when it comes to eating and drinking. They also learn that some animals are unclean and must not be eaten. It seems that just before they arrived where he was staying, this Simon Peter had a dream vision of his own. It implied that mixing with Gentiles and eating unclean meats was now completely OK. Peter clearly believed his vision was from God, but was struggling with what it seemed to be saying. All his past experience was shouting ‘no!’ Yet he came to see us.

Sextus says that the journey back to Caesarea was far from easy. The believers from Joppa did not really know what to say to him and his fellow Gentiles. Peter himself was a picture of confusion. Even when he greeted Cornelius and all of us who had gathered for his arrival, he was really struggling to believe he was where he was and doing what he was doing. Only when Cornelius retold his own vision could you see his face begin to change. Then he stood and spoke. ‘Truly,’ he said, ‘I now understand that God shows no partiality – whatever nation you come from, you are acceptable to God if you fear him and do what is right.’ And from that point on his sense of ease grew and grew. He began to share with us his account of Jesus of Nazareth and what God had done for us all through him. So, when the Spirit came down on us Gentiles, it really seemed to come down in a fresh way on Peter and the Jewish believers from Joppa too. Now, we were one, in Spirit and in truth. Together we danced and sang and praised God.

Sextus and I felt a real sympathy for Peter as he struggled with things that seemed to be part of his identity, which God now seemed to be denying. Could he be a Christian brother to us Gentiles and still be himself? Could he eat, drink and fellowship with Cornelius and continue to be Simon Peter from Jewish Galilee? Accepting us changed him, but did it stop him being himself? On the other hand, could we be Christian brothers and sisters to him without having to change our own cultural identity?

What do *you* think?

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Spend a few minutes in discussion then move on to the following questions:

1. What does the biblical text say about exploring identity?
2. What lessons did you learn?
3. What is the significance of collective identity as opposed to individual identity?
4. In what ways does racism affect people's identity?

Mark 3.20–1 and 31–5 **Jesus, his mother and his brothers**

Jesus extends 'family' by removing its boundaries

If identity is about who we feel 'at home' with, then this story of Jesus publicly trampling down the boundary fence that surrounded his own family is hugely relevant to our study. Remember, the sort of family-centred honour/shame culture that everyone right across the Mediterranean world unthinkingly occupied in Jesus' day would have found this story far more shocking than we do. This sense of shock would have deeply affected the waiting Mary and the rest of Jesus' own family – especially as the key motivation for their visit to Jesus seems to have been an attempt to rescue the reputation of the family (v21). Yet, we need to be clear that Jesus is not repudiating either family or belonging, rather he is vastly extending all that family and belonging seem to mean, to include whoever 'does the will of God'. What does that say to us about Jesus' views on identity?

Luke 15.11–32 **Family fractures repaired**

Jesus tells of the shocking reach of God's inclusiveness

In this oh-so-familiar story of a father and two sons, Jesus further explores God's understanding of family and belonging and, by implication, the sort of understanding we are all called to share. In the sort of family-centred honour/shame culture which was normal in Jesus' and Luke's world the request of the younger son must have been a shattering insult – like telling his father he wished he was dead. Everyone (including the sons in the story) would assume that there was no way back. Even at this point he is 'lost', as good as 'dead' to his family. Yet look how the father behaves on his return. He abandons every vestige of his own and his family's honour and dignity to offer a welcome back. How is the decent, respectful elder son to respond? His father has made himself and his family utterly foolish in the eyes of all decent and respectable people with the wilfully extravagant way he has welcomed this non-person to be family once more. Every cultural assumption about 'belonging' and the nature of 'family' is radically reappraised by this story. This is 'family, Jim, but not as we know it ...' What does this do to our ideas of 'family' and 'belonging' and 'identity'?

Facing Fears

Bible Witness Script – A Galilean Follower of Jesus Based on Mark 10.32–45 and 14.26–42

My name is ... [*MARCIA if the reader is female; MARCUS if the reader is male*]

I'm from Capernaum. I was part of the group that followed Jesus of Nazareth and began to hope that he would change the world. You can read the whole of the story I'm going to tell you in chapters ten and fourteen of Mark's gospel.

We shared some wonderful times in Galilee. We watched how he taught and healed and even fed vast crowds of hungry people, both physically and spiritually. Without ever discussing it openly, we came to have very real hopes that he was the one who would change everything. Moreover, we assumed that we, as his followers, would have a special place right there in the middle of things. It was going to be glory all the way!

But then everything changed. He set out south to Jerusalem, not with an army, or even a vast and overwhelming crowd, just the small group of men and women who were closest to him. He also began to talk of impending persecution and death. We heard him, yet we didn't hear him. Now his words and deeds seemed more and more frightening. We didn't want to be afraid. We tried not to listen. James and John, who were never the best at coping with pressure, just blurted out a request that they get thrones next to his when he came in glory. We all got cross with them! Why should they get the best seats?

But Jesus looked at us all so sadly. He didn't seem interested in power. He didn't seem to want glory. He didn't seem to feel our fear of the unknown. He talked of serving and offering himself as a ransom for many.

At the time, he simply puzzled me. Even my fears seemed more understandable, more comforting than his strange ideas. Ach! I see it all so differently now! Our fears of the unknown, of our lack of control and of the loss of our power just made his task worse. We were getting caught up in the age-old ways of the world. *You* know how it works ... fear and blame are endlessly recycled. Always groups of 'we' blame a trumped-up 'they' for all our problems. Then 'they' learn to fear and resent 'us' in their turn and the struggle for power and control goes on and on and on.

In Gethsemane and at Golgotha Jesus took another road. He refused to fear his loss of power. He deliberately embraced his loss of control. He trusted God to lead him through the unknown. He began a way of being that learns and listens and tries to love – whatever the cost.

It's the only way to deal with our fears. That's what I think now.

What do *you* think?

Spend a few minutes on this question then discuss the following:

1. How can churches contribute to challenging the misinformation some sections of the media thrive on?
2. How can the church develop an affirmative mindset to undergird its work?

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Challenging Racism

Bible Witness Script – A Believer In Antioch Based on Galatians 2.11–14

My name is ... [*JUNIUS, if the reader is male, JUNIA, if the reader is female*]

At that time, I was an eager new member of the group in the city of Antioch that they had just begun to call ‘Christians’. You can read the whole of the story I’m going to tell you in the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Galatia – Galatians for short.

Looking back, I have to admire his determination. At the time, I can remember feeling *very* awkward and embarrassed. Why did he have to make such a fuss, when everyone else was trying so hard to be pleasant and considerate?

You see, these visitors had arrived from Jerusalem. They were close followers of the Apostle James, from the most carefully Jewish part of the church. They did not approve of Jewish Christians sharing in table fellowship with Gentile Christians in the way we regularly did in Antioch. There was no point in upsetting them and letting them carry tales back to Jerusalem. They would be gone in a few weeks; then we could return to normal. The Apostle Peter, who was with us at the time, understood that. Before James’ people arrived he shared freely at mixed Jewish and Gentile fellowship meals. I don’t think he missed a single one. Now, he always seemed to have something else urgent that he had to do whenever there was a risk of a mixed Jew and Gentile fellowship meal. It was simply part of being pleasant and considerate. It was for the peace of the fellowship. Everyone, including Barnabas, clearly understood.

But Paul; Paul saw it differently. And Paul being Paul, he had to say so.

Not only did he bring it up at a community meeting, he made it very clear that he considered the Apostle Peter to be a hypocrite because of his approach to this issue. It was all very tense and no one spoke up to support him, not even Barnabas. Paul was quite alone. Most of us were longing to disappear through a crack in the floor, if only we could find one big enough to fit through ... very difficult!

But, looking back, I’ve come to believe that Paul was right. Sometimes you have to risk being disliked and misunderstood. Sometimes, if the point is too important to sweep it into the corner, you have to be prepared to take a stand on your own. You may even have to cause a scene, if there’s no other way. You have to be ready to challenge openly those who seek the comfort of caring compromise. Some things are that important. They really are ...

Paul reckoned that Peter’s approach betrayed the cross of Christ. As he saw it, the cross had established the same direct access to God for us all, Jew and Greek, slave and free, woman and man. He felt that this equal welcome of everyone in Jesus’ name is central to who we are, to the Gospel we proclaim, to the calling with which we are called. He was ready to risk his reputation to stand up for that truth.

I’ve come to believe that Paul was right.

But, what do *you* think?

1. In the light of this bible story, what is institutional racism?
2. Is it possible to have an institutionally racist church?
3. What strategies can the churches develop to address institutional racism?

Luke 6.20–36

Jesus' preaching

Jesus confronts all who see themselves as superior to others

If you are going to challenge behaviour and ideas, you have to be very clear that the ideas go against the big, deep principles by which you think life should be lived. Here is Jesus preaching these big, deep principles in a way that leaves absolutely no wriggle-room for the would-be racist. (This passage parallels part of Matthew's account of 'The Sermon on the Mount', but retains an in-your-face sharpness that is partly smoothed away in Matthew.) Here is a God who will ultimately intervene in the name of justice and fairness and who calls us all to live now in the light of that commitment. Loving enemies and doing to others as you would have them do to you set a clear standard by which racist taunts, racist assumptions, racist behaviour and racist structures can all be clearly challenged. What's stopping us?

2 Samuel 12.1–10

Nathan confronts David with his failure

Using the good in someone to challenge their failings

This is not a story that is directly about racism (although it may have contributed to the ease with which David was able to consider arranging the death of Uriah the Hittite). It is a story about challenging and uncovering evil. This parable of the lamb allows David to condemn his own evil, to expose his own inconsistency. His own moral opinions are exposed, the better to show up his wrong. Is there something here that could help with addressing the issue of racism? We all know how often we hear people prefacing an account of attitudes and events that are, in the end, racist with the self-defending plaint ... 'I'm not a racist, but ...' This is clearly an area where it is very difficult to admit our need to change. Does Nathan suggest any strategies or offer us any helpful ideas?

Romans 12.1–21

Paul challenges with a new way of being

Grasping the new identity in Jesus allows us diversity without falling into division

Paul is writing to all the ethnically and culturally diverse house fellowships in the capital of the Empire - tiny Greek-speaking groups in a vast Latin-speaking city. By and large, they are marginal groups of recent immigrants. They have to meet in little groups because they have nowhere they can all get together. They are in danger of falling apart along ethnic, cultural and practical divides, as people always seem to do. So Paul, by writing this letter, is seeking not to deny their diverse identities but to subsume all their diversities in a new overarching identity – new life in Christ. Here in chapter twelve he has at last reached the point where he is outlining the practicalities of that new identity. It is this new identity that is his central challenge to incipient racial and cultural divides growing in the body of Christ. Does this help us to challenge personal and structural racism in the church? If so, how?

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